This summer I interned for North Star Destination Strategies in Nashville, Tennessee. North Star is a small company that specializes in community branding. It is a well-known and well-respected company in the marketing industry. Since its establishment in 2000, 170 destinations and municipalities in 40 states have benefited from the work of North Star--this number is rapidly growing. After researching the company before I began my internship and reading about the large impact they have been making across the country, I just knew I was going to be walking in to a huge office building with a large staff. I was extremely surprised to discover that it was not a large building that I would be walking into, but a little house and not a large staff, but only a handful. Needless to say, I was in awe that the amount and quality of work was carried out by only 11 people.

I interned at North Star for 10-weeks from 9 am to 5 pm (most times I would arrive early and stay late). I worked under Rupa DeLoach who is the Vice President of Research Services. Whether a community wants to change its brand or simply know how its economy is doing, Ms. DeLoach is the one behind all the economic research. My title while doing my internship was “Research Assistant” which, in a small company such as North Star, meant a variety of things. Some of what my job entailed was data analysis, organizing focus groups, creating online surveys, Excel data entry, calling around to collect data, and dashboard creation.

I knew going into my internship that I would be working closely with Ms. DeLoach, but I did not realize how immense my responsibilities would be. For instance, the first day I arrived, I was thrown into the mix as if I had been working there for months. Although this was unexpected, I am so happy that I was immediately pushed out of my comfort zone. It was either sink or swim and sinking was out of the question.

From the first day of my internship, I was given information about a tri-county area for which we would be doing economic research. This project stretched out during the entirety of my 10-
weeks. For this project, I had to create a dashboard of all the KPIs (Key Performance Indicators) for a tri-county area that Ms. DeLoach contracted. She gave me a lot of responsibility when it came to creating the dashboard, and for the most part, she let me treat the project as my own. We worked closely with the Convention and Visitors Bureau of the area to gather data that we could not find online or with the help of the research from travel agencies. In fact, most of the KPIs that the contracted area needed were things that had not been calculated before. The majority of the data that we were asked to determine, we had to figure out how to calculate on our own. For example, we had to aggregate the number of visitors each attraction in the tri-county area had each month from 2011 to the present. Something so seemingly simple had many different components to it. We had to first determine the attractions in the tri-county area (which we found to be over 300) and find the phone numbers for all of them. Next, we had to call all of those attractions to see if they had a record of the numbers of their visitors. If the company did not have the exact figures, we had to ask for an estimate and from there we had to determine an equation that gave a range for the number of visitors that this area saw from tourists. This was just one of the 25 to 30 KPIs that we had to find.

After finding nearly all of the necessary KPIs, I had to organize them all in a PowerPoint to send a rough draft to our client. In order to gather a more accurate perception of this area, we had to turn to a survey. Ms. DeLoach gave me a rough draft of the questions she wanted to put on the survey and I revised them and used a database called, Qualtrics, to program the surveys. This survey asked questions ranging from whether or not they were a resident or visitor to estimates of how they allocated their money when visiting.

Because research analysis deals with a lot of data, it was essential to work with Excel. Prior to North Star, I had some experience with working with Excel but as a research analyst, I had to learn a lot of new skills in order to fulfill the demands of the job. I also refined my business etiquette skills, improved my skills in writing business emails, as well as expanding my PowerPoint skills.
Being an intern with a marketing company has definitely help to solidify that marketing is the field that I want to go into. In the same sense, it has also shown me that I do not want to do purely the economic research side of marketing. I know that marketing is a broad field, but North Star has exposed me to many of the different areas. A perk of being in small company is being able to build relationships with the other employees in the company and get to know more of what their job entails. At this point, I think that being a marketing project manager or a brand manager is what I want to do. Not only do they get to travel, but they get to deal with both the creative side and the economic side of marketing. Project managers and the brand managers get to see the whole process of the brand development.

Overall, I think that I have greatly benefited from interning at North Star. While I may not have discovered a passion for economic research, I am grateful that now I can cross it out as something that I have done. I have learned a lot of useful skills in the workplace and I have also learned a lot about myself. I have learned that I am more resourceful than I sometimes give myself credit for, that I perform well under pressure and that I have many valuable ideas to bring to the table. The final thing I learned while at North Star is that coffee does wonders and should not be limited to just the mornings!